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ABSTRACT

This study examined the achievement patterns of former English Language Learners (ELLs) and explored whether time-related variables (length of program participation, grade level exited, and length of participation in the mainstream classroom) play a significant role in predicting academic achievement patterns for these exited students. The study focused on 40 grade 4 exited students (17 from Bilingual English (BE) and 25 from English as a Second Language (ESL)) and 75 eighth grade exited students (40 BE and 25 ESL). For fourth grade, the ESL exited students and the district's regular education students showed a similar distribution of scores in the three subject areas, but fewer ESL program students scored at the Proficient level in English Language Arts. Eight graders showed similar achievement patterns for English Language Arts and mathematics, but in science, more ESL exited students fell in to the failing category. More BE exited students scored in the Needs Improvement category than in the Proficient category for mathematics and science, a pattern different from that of regular education students at fourth grade. Eighth grade exited BE students had scores that diverged from regular education, with more students failing mathematics and science. Achievement patterns for students who had attended a BE program were less sensitive to length of program attendance than those of ESL program students. Findings support the need to move away from a one-model-fits-all approach to more complex ways of meeting the needs of ELLs. (Contains 3 tables and 41 references.) (SLD)

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After Exit: Achievement Patterns of Former English Language Learners

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After Exit: Achievement Patterns of Former English Language Learners

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to address an important gap in the literature regarding district accountability for English Language Learners (ELLs). With few exceptions, ELL program evaluations have focused on the achievement patterns of ELLs who are still considered "limited English proficient." Collectively, these evaluations have been unable to answer the question whether ELLs actually catch up with English proficient peers after attending a specialized program. This study examines the achievement patterns of former ELLs and explores whether time-related variables (length of program participation, grade level exited, and length of participation in the mainstream classroom) play a significant role in predicting academic achievement patterns for these exited students.

Trends in ELL Program Evaluation

School districts are under an obligation to provide specialized support for students who enter school speaking a language other than English and identified as limited English proficient. In the landmark court case, Lau v. Nichols (1974), the court proclaimed, "there is no equality of treatment merely by providing students with the same facilities, textbooks, teachers, and curriculum; for students who do not understand English are effectively foreclosed from any meaningful education." In response to the mandate to provide specialized interventions for ELLs, different programs have implemented, reflecting a variety of bilingual and monolingual English-only approaches (see Brisk, 1998). The effectiveness of the various approaches has been the focus of a long-standing debate (e.g., Crawford, 1999; Willig & Ramirez, 1993).

The dominant paradigm for evaluating programs for ELLs has been, and continues to be, what August and Hakuta (1997) refer to as "advocacy-oriented" program evaluations. This type of evaluation is concerned with proving that an English-only approach is superior to a bilingual approach (or vice versa). Many shortcomings of these studies have been cited over time. First, the studies treat language of instruction as the main if not the only variable influencing student outcomes (Paulston, 1978). Second, English proficiency (and in some cases, mathematics) on a standardized test is the main outcome variable considered. Third, they have been severely criticized on methodological grounds (August and Hakuta, 1997; Rossell and Baker, 1996; Willig and Ramirez, 1993), for their limited scope and focus on short-term (K-3) outcomes (Thomas and Collier, 1997). Finally, they tend to rely on ambiguous program labels to classify

"bilingual" or "English-only," failing to provide sufficient detail about classroom practices and faithful implementation of the intended program design. As a result, the complex interaction of individual, program, and school variables and their effect on program outcomes is ignored.

One response to the methodological shortcomings has been the use of more sophisticated research methodology, such as meta-analysis (Greene, 1998; Willig, 1985) or long-term studies that include more complex variables in the analysis (e.g., Ramirez, 1992; Thomas and Collier, 2002). Another response shifts the attention to the identification and description of those school and program factors that contribute to student success in effective schools or programs for language minority students. Leadership, teacher quality, high expectations, quality curriculum and instructional approaches, and parent-school relationships are key variables found consistently in this literature (e.g., Carter and Chatfield, 1986; Gonzalez, Huerta-Macías, and Tinajero, 1998; Lucas, Henze, and Donato, 1990; Mace-Matluck, 1990; Reyes, Scribner, and Scribner, 1999). An extension of this framework can be found in program evaluations that consider the extent to which program practices match theoretical insights from research on second language acquisition and bilingualism (e.g., Christian, Montone, Lindholm, and Carranza, 1998; De Jong, 2002). Evaluation results are used not only to shape practice but also to reconsider theoretical constructs (August and Hakuta, 1997).

By focusing on ELLs who are still participating in a bilingual or ESL program (and who are therefore still classified as limited English proficient), most evaluation studies overlook what happens to ELLs once they have been placed in a mainstream classroom without specialized bilingual or ESL support. The achievement patterns of former ELLs, or exited students, should be included, however, as an indicator of the effectiveness of a district's efforts to provide equal educational opportunities for ELLs.

Considering Exited Students

The stated goal of the majority of bilingual or ESL programs is to prepare ELLs for successful participation in the mainstream classroom. They are meant to be temporary and not permanent programs, and the process of determining when students are ready to be placed in a mainstream classroom is an integral part of these programs.[1] It is therefore not surprising that discussions regarding exited students have focused on the criteria and instruments that districts

[1] Exceptions are two-way immersion and maintenance bilingual programs. Perceived and implemented as mainstream programs, they typically do not include an exiting process.

(should) use to determine initial ELL status (entry) and their readiness for the all-English standard curriculum classroom (exit) (De Avila, 1990; Gandara and Medina, 1993; Linquanti, 2001; Rossell and Kanter, 1988). These studies show substantial variation in the choice of assessment instruments across and within states, such as a standardized achievement test, an English oral language proficiency test, English literacy tests, or teacher judgment (De George, 1988; Fleischman and Hopstock, 1993; Rossell and Baker, 1988) as well as in the choice of cut-off score determining when a student is ready to be exited from specialized services (e.g., Walton, 1988, cited in De Avila, 1990).

A related issue for policy makers is the length of time an ELL should spend in a bilingual/ESL program. For instance, the Illinois Department of Education states, "The students' rate of transition into mainstream classrooms is the most critical factor in evaluating transitional bilingual education programs" (p.12). The underlying assumption is that the more students exit in a short period of time, the better the program (Gandara and Medina, 1993). There is no evidence, however, that a quick program exit predicts a student's future academic success. It is possible that students exit in a timely fashion but continue to fail academically. Studies have found former ELLs to be behind academically compared to peers in the district on nationally normed standardized tests in reading (e.g., Abella, 1992; Gonzalez, 2001) or the state (e.g., Florida Department of Education, 2001). Others are placed disproportionately in special education after exit (Cummins, 1980; Gersten, 1996) or less challenging classes (Lucas and Wagner, 1998). Moreover, the rate of student progress through a bilingual or ESL program will necessarily be influenced by individual student variables, school variables, program quality (Gandara and Medina, 1993) as well as the criteria set for exit. Despite the lack of validity, length of program participation continues to dominate the effectiveness debate (e.g., De Jong and Ramos, 2003).

Research has largely overlooked, however, the exiting process (also referred to as "mainstreaming" or "reclassification), its effect on students and teachers, and/or the social and academic outcomes for exited ELLs. This gap reflects the perception that the responsibility for meeting the needs of ELLs is that of the bilingual or ESL teacher and once a student is "fixed" and exited from the program standard curriculum teachers (expect to) treat them as native English speakers (Cummins, 2000; Lucas and Wagner, 1998; Shannon, 1990). Thus, from a mainstream perspective, exited students are not distinguished as a separate group because they

are now "native English speakers." They are also largely ignored from a bilingual/ESL perspective because they no longer fall within the confines of specialized services. The purpose of this study was to address this oversight by examining the academic achievement patterns of exited students and the role of time-related variables in predicting academic outcomes.

Research Design

The study took place in medium-sized school district in the Northeastern United States. The district enrolls close to 8,000 students and implements a bilingual (BE) and an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. The district was chosen because of its long-standing experience with ELLs (the first bilingual classroom was established in the late 1960s), its consistency in program philosophy and implementation, and its emphasis on quality of education for all ELLs. The study explores the following two research questions. The first question is whether former ELLs in this district close the academic achievement gap with students in regular education. The second research question examines the role of three variables (length of program participation, length of time spent in standard curriculum at the time of testing, grade of exit) in predicting academic achievement.

Program context

The district's bilingual education (BE) program is designed for native Portuguese or Spanish speakers with limited English proficiency and who are dominant in their native language. The goal of the program is to prepare its students to succeed in a standard curriculum classroom. Before 1995, the program was run as a traditional transitional bilingual education (TBE) program with a focus on transitioning to English literacy and exit within three years. After 1995, the BE model changed to include continued access to the native language and an exit process that emphasized readiness for the mainstream classroom. When considering the data below, it should therefore be kept in mind that the 8th grade former BE students went through an old TBE program design at the elementary level, whereas the 4th grade former BE students attended a program that was in line with the new model. The BE programs are located in schools with the largest proportions of students eligible for free/reduced lunch. The Portuguese programs are located in two schools where more than 50% of the students are eligible free/reduced lunch (63% and 51%, respectively). The two Spanish bilingual programs have 38% and 29% of their students eligible for free/reduced lunch.

The ESL program is a self-contained program with the same objective as the BE program: to prepare students to succeed in a mainstream classroom. The elementary ESL program is taught in English and serves a multilingual population. Students' home language backgrounds include Russian, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, and several other languages. The school in which the ESL program is located has the lowest percentage of students eligible for free/reduced lunch (16%) in the district. Traditionally, the ESL program has served a student population with access to educated parents and native-language resources outside school, such as a Korean Saturday school.

Exit guidelines

The process of exiting students is the same for the ESL and the bilingual program and is outlined in a district document. For oral language, students are expected to score minimally a 4 on comprehension and on production on a rating rubric that ranges from 0 (no oral proficiency) to 5 (oral proficiency is like a native speaker). For English literacy, students are expected to score a Level 3 (fluent reader/writer) on the Language Assessment Scale, a formal language proficiency test (Duncan and De Avila, 1988).

Participants

The sample of exited students was determined by examining exit forms used by the district since 1995 as well as individual student records in the bilingual department. Students whose parents requested their child's exit before the teacher recommended such an exit were excluded as were exited students for whom it could be determined that they were eligible for special education services. This resulted in a total sample of 560 identified exited students who were recommended for exit during or after Kindergarten. To answer the research questions, a subset was created for those exited students who took the state test between 1998 and 2000 in grade 4 or grade 8. This process resulted in a sample of forty 4th grade exited students (seventeen from the BE program and twenty-five from the ESL program) and seventy-five 8th grade exited students (forty BE program students and twenty-five ESL program students) for whom all required data were available (see Table 1).

======INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ======

The majority of the ESL program students exited between Kindergarten and second grade (78%). Of the exited BE program students, one-third exited before third grade, with the majority exiting after grade 2. Except for four students, all others exited during grades 3 through 5. The

average length of program participation for the 4th grade ESL program students was 2.2 years and for the BE program students 3.1 years. The 8th grade ESL program students stayed in their program for an average of 2.6 years, whereas the BE program students completed an average of 3.4 years.

Instruments

The academic achievement outcome measure is a mandated state test developed by the state based on its curriculum standards. Between 1998 and 2000 the state test was administered for English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and Science at grades 4, 8, and 10. The test consists of multiple choice, short-answer, and essay questions, and also includes a writing sample for English Language Arts. Students' raw scores are converted into scaled scores, which are then divided into four proficiency categories: Failing, Needs Improvement, Proficient, and Advanced Proficiency. The study examined distribution of 4th and 8th grade exited and "regular education students" over the proficiency levels in the three subject areas (ELA, Mathematics, and Science). "Regular education" excludes students classified as ELLs as well as students eligible for special needs services.

Analysis

To answer the first research question, whether exited ELLs are performing at similar levels as their peers, "closing the achievement gap" was defined as exited students showing similar patterns on the state test as students in regular education in the district and/or the state as represented by the percentage of students in each of the proficiency categories. Because there were so few students in the Advanced category, it was decided to collapse the Proficient and Advanced Proficient categories into one. Both categories indicate that students are meeting state expectations for the grade level. The analysis therefore considered the percentage of exited and regular education students in ELA, Mathematics, and Science at three proficiency levels: Failing (F), Needs Improvement (NI), and Proficient (P).

The second question examines the role of time variables as these play such a dominant role in policy making. First, the time factor most discussed in the literature, Length of BE or ESL program attendance, was included and defined as the period between entry into the bilingual/ESL program and the date of exit (one school year (9 months) is one year). However, it is also often stated that being in mainstream classrooms can facilitate closing the gap by exposure to mainstream standards and native English speakers. This argument is often used in

criticism of separate programs, such as bilingual education (e.g., Porter, 1998). Thus, two more time variables were included. Length of time in the mainstream classroom was calculated as the number of years/months from the date of exit and the period that the student took the state test. Finally, the analysis considered the exit grade: at which grade level was the student exited (e.g., second grade or fourth grade). A regression analysis was done to see which, if any, variables had a significant effect on achievement outcomes for each of the achievement tests (ELA, Mathematics, and Science).

It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of the study was not to compare the bilingual and ESL program. Student background variables were not controlled for, although there is reason to assume a difference in student characteristics based on the schools' free/reduced lunch characteristics and experience with the school district but to look at patterns within each program.

Results

Academic achievement patterns

To answer the question whether exited students close the achievement gap when compared to the regular education population, the percentage of students scoring in the Failing (F), Needs Improvement (NI) or the Proficient (P) proficiency levels was calculated for 4th and 8th grade exited students for three subject areas, ELA, Mathematics, and Science (Tables 2 and 3). T-test results showed that there were significant differences between the two programs and the results are therefore presented by program.

ESL Program Results

The 4th grade ESL exited students and the district's regular education students show a similar distribution of scores in the three subject areas (Table 2). However, fewer ESL program students score at the Proficient level in ELA as compared to regular education students.

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The 8th grade ESL exited students show similar achievement patterns as students in regular education at the district and the state level for ELA and mathematics. For science, on the other hand, more ESL exited students' scores fall into the failing category, although they match the district and the state patterns at the proficient/advanced proficiency level. Like the elementary students, fewer 8th grade ESL exited students scored at the Proficiency level in ELA.

Bilingual Program Results

More BE exited students score in the Needs Improvement category than in the Proficient category for mathematics and science, a pattern different from the regular education students. The BE exited students more closely parallel the distribution of the regular education students at the district and state level for ELA (Table 3)

== INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE==

The 8th grade exited BE students show a different pattern. Their score distribution diverges from regular education students, having more students in the failing category for mathematics and science and fewer in the Proficiency category. For ELA, on the other hand, exited BE program students resemble the pattern for regular education students. Like the elementary students, fewer BE students scored at the Proficiency level in ELA.

Time variables

The second research question explored whether time variables predicted exited students' academic achievement outcomes. Regression analysis resulted in the following patterns. Length of program participation and length of mainstream classroom participation were not significant for any of the outcome measures (controlling for program model). Exit grade level emerged as a significant predictor for 4th grade ELA and Science ($p<.01$), i.e., the higher the grade level that the student exited, the lower their scores on the 4th grade state test in ELA and Science. At the 8th grade level, none of the variables were found as significant predictors of academic achievement.

A significant interaction effect between grade exited and program model emerged, however, for 8th grade science ($p<.09$), though with a small effect size ($r=.05$). For the exited ESL program students, the lower the grade level they exited, the better their 8th grade science scores. Exited BE program students' scores, on the other hand, slightly improved as they exited at higher grade levels.

Discussion

This study considered the achievement of bilingual students who at one time were classified as "limited English proficient", attended a bilingual or ESL program, and who are now participating in a standard curriculum classroom without specialized services. Including exited students or former ELLs in the analysis approaches district accountability from a broader perspective than previously taken in advocacy-based program evaluations. Meeting the

specialized needs of ELLs cannot be the sole responsibility of a bilingual or ESL program. As Mora (2002) points out, such program attendance represents, on average, an approximate 4% of a student's school career. A focus on former ELLs emphasizes accountability for all teachers involved with bilingual students throughout their school career.

The first research question examined the extent to which exited students in one district were able to meet grade level expectations as compared to their peers. Results indicate that, in general, 4th grade exited students' score distribution over the three proficiency levels (Failing, Needs Improvement, Proficient) resembled those of regular education students at the district and state level for ELA, Mathematics, and Science. At the same time, more former BE and ESL program students scored in the Needs Improvement rather than the Proficient category for ELA. The same trend emerged for mathematics and science for exited BE program students.

For the elementary school level, then, the re-designed BE program and the self-contained ESL program, together with the mainstream program, appear to meet the language and academic needs of ELLs. The fact that exited students are not yet "proficient" to the same extent as other students does raise an important question for the future: will these former ELLs eventually perform at the proficient level or will the gap widen as more demands are placed on students' ability to mediate content through language (Cummins, 2000)? Non-cohort standardized state test data from Florida and California show a wider gap between regular education students and former ELLs for reading as well as the content areas for students at the higher grade levels. Cohort data will be necessary to see if a widening of the gap is occurring or whether the gap remains the same as former ELLs go through the grades.

The 8th grade students showed different achievement patterns. The gap between former exited students and the regular education students was the largest for mathematics (BE exited students only) and science (both BE and ESL exited students) with more students' scores falling into the Failing category. Counter to intuition, the former ELLs largely matched their score distribution over the three proficiency levels for ELA. The latter is unusual; (former) ELLs generally score lower on reading than on mathematics. This may be partially due to a strong ELA curriculum and department in the district as well as former ELLs' access to acquiring the necessary English skills during their elementary schooling (cf. ELA patterns for the 4th graders). These patterns stress, however, the importance of providing ELLs with a program that teaches the English language and literacy but that also grade level content area. This is particularly

important for the BE program. Recall that the 8th grade exited BE program students went through a traditional TBE program, which focused on literacy development and a three-year exit process. Clearly, if bilingual students lag academically behind their native English-speaking peers when they exit, it will be difficult to catch up.

The 8th grade data also suggest the importance of distinguishing between the language skills developed through ELA and the content areas. The content areas have their own register and make specific language demands on students (e.g., Carrasquillo and Rodriguez, 1996; Short, 2002). Even very fluent bilingual students may need teachers to provide them with more explicit scaffolding that pushes language development beyond basic school language to include more sophisticated ways to discuss and engage with academic content (Cummins, 2000; Freeman, Freeman, and Mercuri, 2002) and to demonstrate their learning on a formal test.

In response to the emphasis on length of program participation by policy makers, the study also considered the role of three time variables: length of program participation, length of time in the mainstream, and grade level exited. Except for exit grade, none of these variables was found to be a significant predictor of students' achievement patterns. The results therefore question the central role attributed to exit rates in the effectiveness debate. Length of program participation did not emerge as significant predictor of academic success, but exit grade did. Although the analysis has limited power due to the small number of students at each grade level, the role of exit grade warrants further future exploration with a larger sample. As stated above, the higher the grade level, the higher language and academic demands on the ELL when entering the mainstream classroom. Successful exit may therefore demand different (i.e., more demanding) criteria for determining when a student is ready to exit. Rather than a fixed criterion for all grade levels, this finding suggests the need for a more flexible approach that considers the increased demands that will be placed on an exited student and the extent to which continuing academic language needs of ELLs can be met in the mainstream classroom. Rather than policies that label ELLs either as "in" or "out" of specialized services, a more gradual approach would allow services to change as ELLs become more proficient (Linquanti, 2001; Gandara and Medina, 1993).

Finally, the significant interaction between exit grade and program found for 8th grade exited students is intriguing, though the results must be interpreted with caution due to the small sample size. However, a similar differential effect of length of program participation was found

in a study by the New York Board of Education (2000). In this study, the achievement patterns for students who had attended a bilingual program were less sensitive to length of program attendance than those of ESL program students. Such findings question policies that mandate one program type for all students. If a program closes the gap for ELLs entering and exiting at lower grade levels (i.e., K-2) but not for students who enter at higher grade levels or whose needs are more extensive than can be met within a short time, it cannot be promoted as an effective program for all ELLs. Such a finding supports the need to move away from a one-model-fits-all approach to more complex ways to meeting the needs of ELLs. It also points to the need for a better understanding of the interaction between program features, school variables, and student characteristics.

Conclusion

Exited ELLs are important to consider within a larger framework of district accountability. The schooling of minority language students is not only the responsibility of bilingual or ESL teachers but continues after students have been exited from such programs. Statements about achievement patterns of ELLs and native English-speaking students or claims that linguistic barriers for ELLs have been overcome can only be examined when exited ELLs are included in the analysis. A district cannot be said to have met ELLs' academic and linguistic needs if discrepancies in academic achievement patterns between exited ELLs and native English speakers persist. It is therefore important to disaggregate data for former ELLs and follow their achievement over time.

This exploratory study into the achievement patterns of former ELLs also raises issues previously overlooked in traditional advocacy-oriented program evaluations that only include students who are still labeled as "limited English proficient," such as the relationship between exit grade and academic achievement, the appropriateness of specialized programs for students with certain background characteristics, the role of academic language proficiency in the content areas, as well as the importance of examining long-term academic achievement patterns. It will not be sufficient, however, to only examine academic outcome data. Research will also have to explore underlying factors that can facilitate or hinder the exit process, how students and teacher mediate the exit process, as well as the social, linguistic, and academic needs of exited students when they first encounter the mainstream classroom and continuing over time as language and content demands increase (e.g., Franson, 1999; Shannon, 1990).

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Table 1 Exited Students Sample characteristics

	ESL Program	BE Program
Sample Size Grade 4	N=26	N=13
Sample Size Grade 8	N=21	N=36
Exit Grade Level	K-2 (75%)	K-2 (33%) and 3-5 (60%)
Average program attendance	Grade 4: 2.2 years Grade 8: 2.5 years	Grade 4: 3.1 years Grade 8: 3.4 years
School characteristics	16% free/reduced lunch	29%-63% free/reduced lunch

Table 2 Proficiency Levels for Grade 4 and Grade 8 former ESL students for English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science (1998-2000) compared to regular education students in the district and the state

	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS			MATHEMATICS			SCIENCE		
	F	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**P/Adv**
Gr. 4									
ESL	3.8%	76.9%	19.2%	3.8%	30.8%	65.4%	3.8%	34.6%	61.5%
District	2.7%	65.3%	31.9%	9.6%	40.3%	50.1%	3.2%	27.2%	69.6%
State	6.7%	69.2%	24.1%	14.4%	43.6%	41.9%	5.7%	32.5%	67.7%
Gr. 8									
	F	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**Prof/Adv**
ESL	9.5%	33.3%	57.1%	19%	38.1%	42.9%	28.6%	19%	52.4%
District	6.7%	24.1%	69.2%	14.4%	43.6%	41.9%	5.7%	32.5%	61.7%
State	7.2%	27.4%	65.8%	34.1%	28.4%	37.7%	34.2%	30.7%	35.1%

Table 3 Proficiency Levels for Grade 4 and Grade 8 former BE students for English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science (1998-2000) compared to regular education students in the district and the state

	ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS			MATHEMATICS			SCIENCE		
	F	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**P/Adv**
Gr. 4									
BE	0.0%	92.3%	7.7%	7.7%	69.2%	23.1%	7.7%	61.5%	30.8%
District	2.7%	65.3%	31.9%	9.6%	40.3%	50.1%	3.2%	27.2%	69.6%
State	6.7%	69.2%	24.1%	14.4%	43.6%	41.9%	5.7%	32.5%	67.7%
Gr. 8									
	F	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**P/Adv**	**F**	**NI**	**Prof/Adv**
BE	5.6%	41.7%	52.8%	52.8%	30.6%	16.7%	41.7%	44.4%	13.9%
District	6.7%	24.1%	69.2%	14.4%	43.6%	41.9%	5.7%	32.5%	61.7%
State	7.2%	27.4%	65.8%	34.1%	28.4%	37.7%	34.2%	30.7%	35.1%

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